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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 ADDIS ABABA 000783

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [ECON](#) [ET](#)  
SUBJECT: ELECTION HERALD 5: EPRDF SANGUINE IN SNNPR,  
OPPOSITION CLAIMS WIDESPREAD HARASSMENT

REF: ADDIS ABABA 667 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: DCM Deborah Malac. Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary  
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¶1. (C) Supporters of the ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) and opposition United Ethiopian Democratic Forces (UEDF) provided differing accounts of the registration and campaign process in the run-up to April's local elections during the Ambassador's March 17-18 visit to the Southern Nations, Nationalities and People's Region (SNNPR). The EPRDF will field candidates for all kebele woreda and zonal council seats in every area the Ambassador visited, traditionally opposition strongholds. In contrast, the opposition UEDF contends that it has only been able to field an insignificant number of kebele council candidates due to EPRDF harassment. The UEDF intends to field primarily woreda and zonal council candidates, although many UEDF woreda candidates are quitting the race in response to what they describe as coercive tactics and thuggery by EPRDF administrators and affiliated cadres. While authorities are not arresting opposition candidates often, the EPRDF's tactics include threatening livelihoods of opposition supporters by withholding safety net funds from qualified beneficiaries and destroying income-generating crops. National Electoral Board (NEB) officials in SNNPR clearly lack the will, capacity and neutrality to arbitrate election-related disputes, or to address opposition claims of systematic harassment. However, declining economic indicators and widespread support for the opposition in SNNPR may yet produce some opposition victories at the zonal level in the region. The EPRDF's response to any perceived opposition successes, both before, during and after the local elections, will provide an early indication of its intentions in SNNPR for the 2010 national elections. Now is the time to begin to focus attention on the need for credible national elections in 2010, for both national and regional stability.  
END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) The Ambassador traveled to Hosanna, Durame and Shone in SNNPR on March 17 and 18 to assess democratic space in advance of local elections in April. In Hosanna and Durame the Ambassador met with Hadiya Zone Administrator Melese Alemu, Hosanna town NEB representative Beletech Mulugetta, and representatives of the opposition Hadiya Nationality Democratic Organization (HNDO) and Hadiya Zone Administrator Melese Alemu. In Durame, the Ambassador met with Kembatta Tembaro Zone Chief Gebrekiristos Nuraye, NEB representative

Takele Neguissie and representatives of the opposition Ethiopian Social Democratic Organization (ESDFP). At Shone, the Ambassador met with representatives of HNDO. HNDO and ESDFP are allied under the banner of the UEDF, led by SNNPR native son Beyene Petros. Beyene facilitated discussions at each stop with HNDO and ESDFP representatives. Poloffs, Senior Political FSN and A/RSO (TDY) accompanied the Ambassador. The Ambassador also visited USAID projects at Butajira and Morsito.

#### NEB-ulous Statistics

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¶3. (C) In Hosanna, the NEB official responsible for the zone was not present despite having accepted the meeting in advance. The NEB office had no statistical data posted or otherwise available. Hosanna city NEB representative Beletech, a school teacher on temporary assignment, provided only cursory information. The total number of registered voters in Hosanna town/zone has increased from approximately 500,000 in 2005 to 600,000 this year. Beletech said that the ruling EPRDF has fielded candidates for all kebele council, woreda council and zonal council seats in contest. There are eight kebeles in Hosanna town/zone, each with approximately 200 seats at stake. Beletech said the opposition had no candidates for kebele councils. Each of the eleven woredas in the zone has five seats available on the woreda council and fifty-five seats are at stake on the zonal council. Beletech added that the opposition had fielded a full slate of candidates for woreda and zonal councils but, for reasons unknown to her, opposition candidates are abandoning their bids for woreda seats. In Durame, NEB representative Takele had no statistics for how many EPRDF or opposition candidates

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would stand for election, or how many voters had registered in Kembatta Tembaro zone. Takele said that the EPRDF would field candidates for all kebele woreda and zonal slots, while the opposition would field all candidates for woreda and zonal councils. The opposition, Takele added, did not register many kebele council candidates in urban areas but had registered some for rural areas.

#### Zonal Administrators Sanguine About the Vote...

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¶4. (C) Hadiya Zonal Administrator Melese said the zone is eager for elections, noting that voter and candidate registration has been completed and both the ruling party and opposition have begun campaigning. Melese added that the zone administration had been instructed from "high above" to ensure that ruling party cadres at the grass roots level should not be "overzealous." Melese said the EPRDF is committed to stability and to strengthening rule of law and democratic institutions, underscoring that stability is key to economic development. In Hadiya Zone, Melese said, the EPRDF stands on its platform and encourages the opposition to participate in the local elections and "let the people decide." Melese noted that the ruling party had lost to the opposition in his zone in three national elections, so people are well versed in their rights and willing to punish administrations that do not deliver services. Nonetheless, Melese expressed confidence that the EPRDF would acquit itself well in the April local elections, noting that people are impressed that the EPRDF is "so smooth these days" and that "the opposition is worried about how quiet and accommodating (we) have been" in the pre-election run-up. "The people know who is working on their behalf," he said, adding "and they tell us the opposition lies."

¶5. (C) Melese acknowledged that the opposition will field an insignificant number of candidates for kebele elections and limited numbers for woreda seats, but will put forth more candidates for zonal councils. Campaigning has started, he said, but the EPRDF is keeping a low profile and simply canvassing house to house, rather than encouraging large

political rallies. "We know how much support we have and we don't want to look too aggressive," Melese said, noting "that could intimidate opposition candidates." The EPRDF broadcasts its messages on local radio via the regional capital in Awasa. Melese said the opposition UEDF has the right to stage political rallies but asserted that turnout is low because "the people don't believe the contents of the opposition's platform."

16. (C) Kembatta Tembaro Zone Chief Gebrekiistos was likewise sanguine about the upcoming elections. Noting his zone was a birthplace of Ethiopian opposition parties, with many well-known opposition figures, Gebrekiistos complained that opposition candidates to often run based on personal grievances. However, the Kembatta Tembaro Zone does not have "rules problems" and Gebrekiistos wants to see free, fair and democratic elections. Casting pre-election disputes as fraternal jockeying ("we complain (about) each other" (sic.) and "we are in a 'cold war' not a 'hot war'"), Gebrekiistos said that opposition candidates are standing in kebele woreda and zonal elections but there are splits in the opposition about whether to participate in the elections. The EPRDF's baseline consideration is that the elections are peaceful. While the opposition has done well in the zone in the past, Gebrekiistos said, "now the big crowds are with us - the balance has shifted." Gebrekiistos dismissed opposition claims of harassment, labeling such claims as flights of fancy of disgruntled former EPRDF members who have sought patronage from the opposition. Gebrekiistos did acknowledge that an unusual number of registered opposition candidates are discontinuing their bids in advance the elections, but declined to speculate on the cause.

...But Feeling the Heat on the Economy  
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17. (C) Both Melese and Gebrekiistos said inflationary pressures are affecting their zones. Gebrekiistos in particular was keen to talk about declining economic indicators, noting that his zone's economic circumstances reflect those of the nation, with high population density and subsistence agriculture. While the Ethiopian government is

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working on food security programs with stakeholders, failure of the rains has had a major, adverse impact on his most impoverished constituents. In addition, recent national economic growth has not reached broad swaths of the Kembatta Tembaro Zone, which lacks capital. Although local farm production is up, people still complain about lack of water, telecommunications and infrastructure, Gebrekiistos said. Safety net program local purchasing has driven prices of essential grains through the roof and food security programs lack the capacity to absorb shocks, such as the failure of the rains. Contingency foods supplies are being used for daily subsistence in some areas, Gebrekiistos added.

Opposition Describes Litany of Harassment  
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18. (C) In stark contrast to EPRDF and NEB views on the local elections process, opposition candidates and supporters described widespread coercive tactics, by ruling party administrators and cadres at the zonal, woreda and kebele level, designed to force opposition candidates, their families and their communities to abandon their election bids. UEDF supporters say that EPRDF tactics have largely shifted from outright arrest to more subtle forms of coercion and intimidation - with an aim to forcing opposition members to withdraw their candidacies prior to the election. During the trip, the Ambassador heard personal testimonials by more than twenty-five opposition candidates and supporters. The litany of alleged NEB, ruling party administrator or affiliated cadre threats and/or actions included: eliminating registered opposition candidacies based on fraudulent technicalities; making it impossible for opposition members

to register their candidacy by keeping registration offices shuttered; denying idi (burial association) rights, leading to social ostracization; refusing to allow the children and/or cattle of opposition candidates to mingle with other children and/or cattle; eliminating livelihoods (in order to divide families, forcing candidates to choose between their party and the needs of their own dependents); and claiming that the benefits of development will not accrue to local communities that do not support the EPRDF.

¶9. (C) In many cases, UEDF candidates and supporters described economically devastating or life-threatening forms of harassment. For example, opposition candidates claimed that government administrators and cadres: threatened to or actually dismantled their houses, denied them safety net benefits (including to handicapped beneficiaries), evicted them from housing, withheld their salaries, forced them out of church-based community work, destroyed their crops, burned down their houses or threatened murder. The NEB and the police take no action when claims of harassment or crimes are brought to their attention. UEDF's Beyene said such tactics are designed to frustrate, block or confuse candidates and their supporters, and he cautioned that the SNNPR population will not simply stand aside and watch such flagrant violations of their rights. As a result of these and other tactics, in one zone the opposition will field only 215 candidates for 100,000 kebele seats, while more than half of the opposition's registered candidates for woreda councils (more than 300 individuals) have dropped out of the election in the past month. However, the UEDF will not boycott the local elections because, as one member put it, "the dividends of democracy are greatest at the grass-roots level."

¶10. (C) At Serara village, between Hosanna and Durame, the Ambassador toured an alleged arson site, where a traditional gojo hut had burned to the ground. Tesfaye Eyako, the homeowner and an opposition candidate, witnessed party cadres came at midnight and set the fire with petrol poured at the base of the straw and mud hut. Tesfaye and his family escaped the conflagration but lost their home, their possessions and two valuable hybrid cattle. The police came to the site but took no further action. Tesfaye's older brother, also an opposition activist, similarly lost a home and was imprisoned for one year without charges around the 2000 elections. Tesfaye said he believes the ruling party cadres want to use him as an example to intimidate opposition supporters, but added that he believes he has the full support of the community. Community members watched as the Ambassador toured the site and their general demeanor seemed to confirm Tesfaye's assertions.

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Comment

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¶11. (C) At the kebele level in SNNPR, April's local elections are a foregone conclusion. Woreda results will depend on how many opposition candidates remain in the race, although it is clear that significant numbers are withdrawing. It is possible that the opposition may win some seats in the zonal councils, if they do not see an up-tick in threats. The number of testimonials from opposition candidates and supporters, combined with the passion and detail with which they spoke about their circumstances, indicates that ruling party administrators and cadres are engaging in widespread coercive tactics in the run-up to the local elections to ensure a strong showing by EPRDF candidates. The NEB clearly lacks the will, capacity and neutrality to arbitrate election-related disputes in SNNPR, or address opposition claims of systematic harassment. However, declining economic indicators and widespread support for the opposition in SNNPR may yet produce some opposition victories in this region. The EPRDF's response to any perceived opposition successes will provide an early indication of its intentions in SNNPR for the 2010 national elections. If current trends of

harassment and intimidation continue, SNNPR may see an up-tick in localized violence down the road as people seek alternative means to create democratic space or express their frustration at the lack thereof. Now is the time to begin to focus attention on the need for credible national elections in 2010, for both national and regional stability. END  
COMMENT.  
YAMAMOTO